

Pro Bono Week 2026: Serving Justice, Strengthening Democracy

News

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Every day, legal problems keep people from fully participating in their communities and in civic life. A family waits more than a decade for safety. A young person loses housing she is legally entitled to. Students are told what they cannot read. Children are held alone in cells. For the lawyers at Jenner & Block, these aren't abstract problems. They're calls to action.

As we mark the American Bar Association's US Pro Bono Week, whose 2026 theme is **Serving Justice. Strengthening Democracy.**, we're shining a light on the work that defines us beyond the courtroom: advocacy that helps individuals protect their rights, secure stability, and engage more fully in the communities they call home.

From a green-card applicant freed from unlawful detention, a Native foster youth and her tribe winning change for young people statewide, students and parents defending their freedom to read, and children in custody challenging solitary confinement, our pro bono service tackles the challenges that shape people's lives most directly. We ensure that access to justice isn't determined by the ability to pay.

The work featured here represents just a fraction of what our lawyers do every day. Because for us, pro bono is who we are.

To learn more about our pro bono work, explore Jenner's annual pro bono report ***The Heart of the Matter***.

Securing Freedom: Immediate Release and Critical Protections for Green-Card Applicant

Jenner & Block successfully represented Serigne Awa Balla Diop, a nineteen-year-old green-card applicant from Senegal whom ICE unlawfully detained during a generalized enforcement action in Manhattan's Chinatown. Working in partnership with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), our firm achieved an extraordinary result: the Court ordered Serigne's immediate release and provided critical protections against his rearrest.

Serigne entered the United States as an unaccompanied child in 2023. He moved to New York and lived there without incident while he worked and pursued a green card. On October 21, 2025, Serigne happened to be sitting in a parked car near an ICE raid targeting West African street vendors on Canal Street. Though he was not a target of the raid, ICE officers summarily arrested Serigne, immediately sent him to a detention facility in New Jersey, and later transported him to a detention facility in Jena, Louisiana. Serigne was held there for nearly 70 days as Jenner fought for his release.

On December 29, in a remarkably swift decision, the US District Court for the District of New Jersey granted the petition for a writ of habeas corpus that Jenner filed on Serigne's behalf. The Court ordered Serigne's immediate release from detention, permanently enjoined the government from re-arresting him under the statute the government had initially invoked, and retained jurisdiction over Serigne's case if he is ever re-detained. This outcome secured both individual freedom and lasting protection for our client.

San Francisco Office Managing Partner Reid Schar and Partner Matthew Klapper led the work, alongside Associates Dylan Madoff, Leila Hooshyar, and Amber Gibson, in partnership with Wendy Wylegala and Halina Schiffman-Shilo from KIND.

Protecting Native Youth: Life-Changing Settlement Drives Statewide Policy Change for Foster Youth

Jenner & Block successfully represented a former foster youth and member of the Bear River Band of Rohnerville Rancheria, a federally recognized tribe in Humboldt County, California, who faced homelessness and the loss of critical services. The firm advocated for pro bono clients Madison Fisher and her tribe in litigation against the State of California and Humboldt County, securing \$45,000 in compensation and a statewide policy change that will protect Native foster youth throughout California. Federal law protects American Indian foster youth from being penalized for receiving tribal distributions, which often serve as compensation for historical injustices committed against their tribes. Despite this protection, officials from California's Department of Social Services and Humboldt County considered these distributions in determining Extended Foster Care eligibility, leading to vulnerable former foster youths like Madison being denied benefits through the Extended Foster Care program. These former foster youths lost critical housing, education, and medical services with dire consequences.

California Tribal Families Coalition first asked the firm to review the case in 2023. After two years of litigation, the Jenner team, working alongside the California Tribal Families Coalition, reached a settlement that achieved both individual justice and systemic change: Madison won compensation for the Extended Foster Care benefits she had been wrongfully denied, the County publicly acknowledged causing harm to tribal youth, and California clarified statewide policy changes ensuring Native youth will not be forced to choose between accepting money they're rightfully owed and accessing life-sustaining services.

The team was led by Partners Kate Spelman and Todd Toral with support from Partners Amb. Keith M. Harper and Allison Tjemslund, Special Counsel Krystalyn Kinsel, Associates Alex Ramsey, Sriya Chadavalada, Ben Seelig, and Effiong Dampha, Junior Paralegal Christal May, former associates Julia Hirata and Benjamin Malings, and former paralegal supervisor Christopher Ward, former legal practice assistant Shoeba Hassan.

Defending the Freedom to Read: Library Censorship Policy Struck Down in Huntington Beach

In a significant pro bono win, Jenner & Block successfully challenged a censorship policy at the City of Huntington Beach's public libraries.

On September 5, 2025, Orange County Superior Court Judge Lindsey Martinez granted the firm's petition for writ of mandate, striking down a policy that required parental consent for minors to access books with "sexual content"—a definition so broad that it could have included health education materials, young adult novels, and even classic works of literature such as Romeo and Juliet and The Great Gatsby.

Filed with co-counsel partnering organizations ACLU of Southern California, First Amendment Coalition, and Community Legal Aid SoCal, the case was brought on behalf of high school students, parents, and community advocacy organization Alianza Translatinx.

The ruling marks a significant judicial interpretation of California's Freedom to Read Act, which prohibits public libraries from limiting access to materials based on their content or viewpoint. In rejecting the City's arguments on home-rule authority and mootness, the court affirmed that Huntington Beach's policies violated state law and were unenforceable.

This outcome was the result of the dedicated work of Partners A.J. Thomas and Lauren Greene, Special Counsel Andrew Sullivan, Associates Sarah Lee, Laura Koeller, and Tyler Emeney, Supervising Paralegal Manu Salas, Senior Legal Practice Assistant Laura Saltzman, and former associate Eddie Crouse.

Protecting Children in Custody: Federal Class Action Challenges Solitary Confinement of Youth in New York

Jenner & Block, in partnership with The Legal Aid Society, filed a federal class action lawsuit challenging the New York State Office of Children and Family Services' (OCFS) practice of subjecting youth to solitary confinement.

The lawsuit, filed in the US District Court for the Southern District of New York, alleges that OCFS routinely confines children alone in cells for up to 24 hours per day, sometimes for weeks or months, while denying them access to education, programming, and basic necessities. The complaint argues these practices violate the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The lawsuit seeks declaratory and injunctive relief to end these practices and ensure youth in OCFS custody receive humane, age-appropriate care.

The Jenner team is led by Partners Jeremy Creelan, Jacob Alderdice, and Damian Williams with support from Associates Marielle Sanchez, Alex Ussia, Owen Keiter, Anne Warnke, Niki Wasserman, Lauren Hackett, Benjamin Rhind, and Jane Mezzino, and paralegal Anastasia Swetz.

Related Lawyers



Nura Maznavi

Pro Bono Counsel
fmaznavi@jenner.com
+1 213 239 6903

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